JOHN McCAIN'S GHOST AND MY CAMPAIGN FOR NOTHING

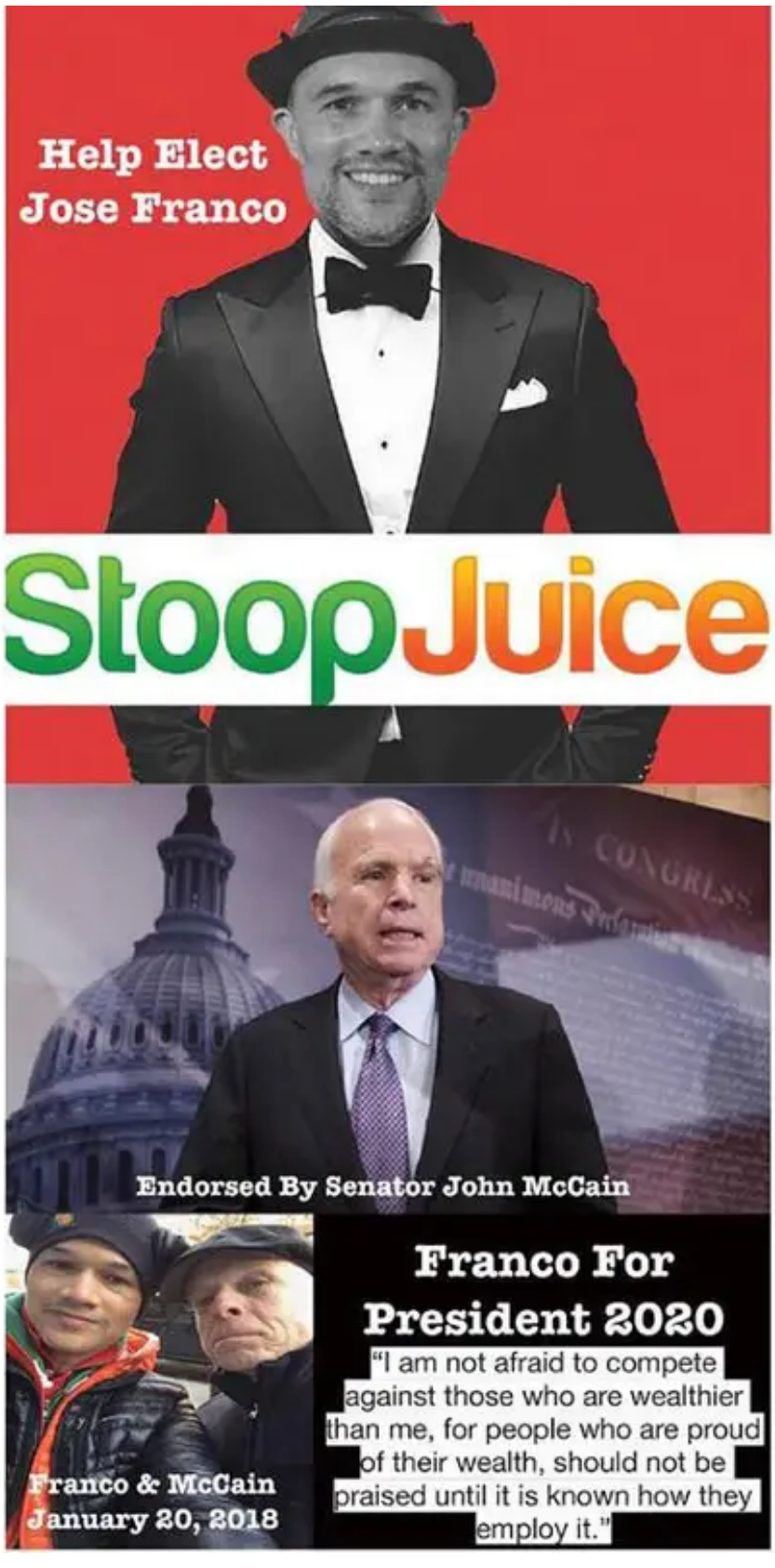
JOSE FRANCO

By Jose Franco

June 2025

Pamphlet

*actual Jose Franco For President campaign flyer


Help Elect
Jose Franco
StoopJuice
Endorsed By Senator John McCain
Franco & McCain
January 20, 2018
Franco For
President 2020
"I am not afraid to compete against those who are wealthier than me, for people who are proud of their wealth, should not be praised until it is known how they employ it."

"Instead of building walls Mr Trump needs to tear down his own inner walls and get in touch with his feelings. Stoop Juice has partnerships with several life coaches in Park Slope. The life coaching sessions will be complements of Stoop Juice. I think all Donald Trump needs is a 10 day juice cleanse, a colonic and a hug."

(not necessarily in that order)

Jose Franco

Forward 4

Interrupting vs. Attuning—A Political Question 6

Chapter 1: Why Most Americans Lack the Intellectual Bandwidth 8

Chapter 2: The Bronx Taught Me to Look Inward, Even When the World Doesn't Want To 10

Chapter 3: The Voice That Stayed When Everyone Left 13

Chapter 4: Thinking for Yourself in a World Telling You What to Believe 17

Chapter 5: The Dance Between Bold Action and Reflective Growth in Money and Democracy 19

Chapter 6: Contrasting Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Writings with 'Country Before Party' Rhetoric 22

Chapter 7: Why Most Americans Lack the Intellectual Bandwidth to Conceptualize Che's Nuances 24

Chapter 8: The Fairness Myth at the Cost of Comfort 27

Chapter 9: The Distance I Didn't See: Writing for an Audience That Isn't Listening 30

Chapter 10: Notes from a Man Who Might've Just Needed Therapy.....33

Chapter 11: The Discipline of Insignificance 36

FORWARD

I didn't set out to write a pamphlet about politics. I set out to understand why I kept writing essays that never quite landed—why I felt compelled to keep thinking out loud in public, even when no one was asking me to. Somewhere along the way, I realized the deeper question I was wrestling with wasn't about politics at all. It was about disconnection: between who I thought I was writing for and who was actually reading—if anyone was reading at all.

This pamphlet is a collection of those moments—essays I submitted, repurposed, or wrote as acts of internal excavation. They trace my effort to reconcile with a part of me that kept hoping earnest reflection might still have a place in public life. I'm aware that much of it veers into introspection, and I know that my tone can feel distant to people who experience the world as something urgent and unforgiving. But I wasn't trying to be clever or abstract. I was trying to be honest, even if that honesty came wrapped in detours and doubt.

The title—John McCain's Ghost and My Campaign for Nothing—might sound like a punchline. In truth, it was born out of one of the few political gestures I ever made that felt completely real: standing outside my Brooklyn juice bar in 2019 with a clipboard and a John McCain impersonator, asking strangers to sign my petition to run for president. Not because I believed I'd win—because I wanted to see whether sincerity, stripped of marketing and agenda, could still create a human exchange.

That experiment didn't end with a campaign. It became a question I haven't stopped asking: Can someone like me—a man with no institutional backing, born in Puerto Rico, rooted in contradiction—still say something useful in a culture conditioned to value certainty over vulnerability?

I don't pretend to have the answers. This pamphlet doesn't offer solutions. What it offers, instead, is a record of an internal campaign: one to confront my blindspots, examine the stories I tell myself, and acknowledge the distance between the moral clarity I often write about and the messy, unfinished life I actually live.

If you've picked this up expecting ideology, you may be disappointed. These essays are not about taking sides. They're about the tension between conscience and performance, the friction between self-awareness and action. They're about wondering whether writing—especially slow, reflective writing—still matters in a world where attention is currency and nuance feels like a luxury.

Maybe this pamphlet will resonate. Maybe it won't. But I put it together because I needed to stop writing in fragments and finally look at the whole—however uneven, however personal, however unlikely it is to go viral.

This is my campaign for nothing. And maybe, in that nothing, there's still something worth saying.

—Jose Franco
Brooklyn, NY
2025

INTERRUPTING VS. ATTUNING—A POLITICAL QUESTION

I've spent the past few years thinking about the tension between interrupting and attuning—especially when it comes to how we talk about politics, identity, and morality in America. We often treat interruption as activism and attunement as complicity. But it's rarely that simple. We interrupt what we don't understand, and sometimes we attune only to what affirms us.

What complicates this is our growing comfort with talking at each other instead of with each other. Political speech in this country often rewards disruption more than it values discernment. We're encouraged to assert, not inquire—to brand ourselves through opinion rather than build understanding through dialogue. Somewhere along the way, speaking loudly became synonymous with speaking truthfully, and listening became a passive act instead of a courageous one.

But attunement requires something interruption does not: humility. To attune is to say, "I might not see the full picture." It's a quiet but radical act. In contrast, interruption is often an expression of urgency—sometimes necessary, but often performative. The challenge is knowing when urgency is warranted, and when it's a mask for discomfort.

This distinction became more personal to me when I noticed how often I interrupted—not just conversations, but people's experiences. I'd cut off their narratives with my own interpretations, assuming I knew better or faster. It wasn't always conscious. Sometimes it came from a place of genuine concern. But other times, it came from fear—fear of what might be revealed if I sat in their story a little longer.

Politics in America tends to amplify this dynamic. We interrupt through headlines, tweets, sound bites. There's pressure to respond before reflecting. To position ourselves before understanding others. That's how the performance works—an endless game of call and response where no one really changes.

Attuning, on the other hand, demands presence. It's not agreement. It's attention. And attention is hard when you're conditioned to anticipate disagreement. Harder still when disagreement feels like a threat to identity. That's why most political discourse today isn't dialogue—it's a series of pre-recorded monologues waiting to be aired.

What I've learned is that both interrupting and attuning have a place—but neither should be reflexive. We need to interrupt injustice. We need to attune to pain. We need to interrupt our own biases and attune to nuance. That takes practice, not just ideology.

The truth is, I've failed at both. I've interrupted out of ego. I've attuned out of guilt. I've used both as shields. But the goal isn't to be perfect—it's to become more precise. To ask not just what we're responding to, but why. And to recognize that the line between interrupting and attuning is not fixed. It shifts depending on context, power, and intention.

That's what this pamphlet wrestles with—not just what we say in public, but what we tell ourselves in private. Whether we can hear the difference between confrontation and curiosity. Whether we're building bridges or just burning time.

So before I tell you what I think, I've tried to ask myself: Am I interrupting, or am I attuning? And does this distinction help us imagine a better way to be in conversation—with each other, and with ourselves?

CHAPTER 1: WHY MOST AMERICANS LACK THE INTELLECTUAL BANDWIDTH

Nuance doesn't sell. That's the first truth I had to accept when I began trying to make sense of why political discourse in America feels like a race to the bottom. The louder you are, the more followers you get. The more outrage you generate, the more airtime you're granted. In a culture designed around clicks and spectacle, there's little space left for the slow, inconvenient work of understanding complexity.

Take someone like Che Guevara. For some, he's a revolutionary hero. For others, a dangerous ideologue. But what very few people are willing to do is sit with both realities at once—to confront the contradictions that make him human, and therefore, instructive. We flatten people into symbols. We interrupt their complexity with our need for certainty.

When I wrote about Che, I wasn't trying to defend him. I was trying to wrestle with the parts of him that reflect the parts of us we often deny. That we can fight for justice and still hurt others. That we can be deeply principled and deeply flawed. That we can mean well and still be blind to our own righteousness. And that maybe, instead of canceling or canonizing people, we should examine what their lives expose in us.

But that kind of thinking requires bandwidth—emotional, intellectual, and moral. And most Americans, through no fault of their own, are stretched thin. Between jobs, debt, the daily onslaught of news, and the psychological toll of constant comparison, there's little capacity left for reflective thought. We reach for shortcuts. We rely on cues. And in that environment, the nuance dies.

This isn't just a media problem. It's a human one. We all want to belong, and the easiest way to secure belonging is to adopt the dominant mood of your tribe—whether that's indignation, irony, or zeal. So instead of slowing down to attune to what someone is really saying, we interrupt with our assumptions.

And here's the hard part: we often mistake that interruption for virtue. We think we're "calling out," when really, we're tuning out. We think we're holding the line, when in truth, we've stopped listening altogether. And it's in that exact space—the gap between what we think we're doing and what we're actually doing—where real political work is either born or buried.

I don’t pretend to be above this. I’ve interrupted more than I’ve attuned. I’ve spoken over people in an effort to seem principled. I’ve tried to win arguments instead of listening for the question beneath the anger. But I’ve also felt what it’s like to be misread, misunderstood, and misrepresented—especially when I’m trying to be honest.

So I write this chapter as both a confession and a call. We have to reclaim our ability to sit with complexity. To make space for contradiction. To see people not as headlines or hashtags, but as whole beings caught in systems that reward simplification.

That kind of seeing isn’t glamorous. It won’t go viral. But it might just help us begin the kind of politics that heals instead of harms. And that, I think, is worth the bandwidth.

CHAPTER 2: THE BRONX TAUGHT ME TO LOOK INWARD, EVEN WHEN THE WORLD DOESN'T WANT TO

The Bronx never asked me to be impressive. It asked me to survive.

I didn't grow up thinking about self-reflection or the concept of inner peace. In the Bronx, peace was something you carved out of noise, not something you found waiting in a quiet room. If you didn't know how to protect yourself—emotionally, psychologically, spiritually—someone else's pain could become your inheritance.

We learned early that the world wasn't going to pause for our feelings. That rent had to be paid, jobs had to be worked, dignity had to be defended. I don't romanticize that hardness, but I do honor it. Because buried inside that reality was a different kind of wisdom: a training ground for noticing the difference between what's real and what's performative.

You can't grow up in the Bronx without developing a bullshit detector. But what's less talked about is how that instinct can be turned inward. How it teaches you to question your own stories. Your own coping mechanisms. Your own lies.

I didn't know I was doing that when I was younger. I just knew I was uncomfortable with the way people talked about "success" and "respectability." I didn't buy the idea that moving out of the Bronx meant you'd made it. I saw too many people leave physically but stay emotionally stuck—still haunted by the noise, still performing for a world that had never seen them clearly.

What the Bronx gave me was something quieter and harder to define: a sensitivity to contradiction. A willingness to sit in discomfort. A strange mix of skepticism and hope that refuses to be silenced by slogans. It taught me to look inward—not because the world welcomed it, but because the world rarely made sense otherwise.

When I left the Bronx for college, I thought I was escaping something. In reality, I was carrying it with me. The habits. The defenses. The belief that vulnerability was a luxury reserved for people who didn't have to worry about survival. It took me years to unlearn that.

And even now, I'm still unlearning.

Because here's the truth: looking inward isn't celebrated in most American culture. It's certainly not celebrated in politics. We reward confidence over curiosity. We equate certainty with leadership. We expect our public figures to have answers, not questions.

But real growth—the kind that changes communities, families, nations—starts with questions. It starts with doubt. With the willingness to admit that your instincts, your training, your assumptions might be wrong. And the Bronx, in its own rough way, prepared me for that. It gave me the grit to endure, but also the courage to soften.

Softness, in the Bronx, isn't weakness. It's strategy. You learn to read a room. You learn to hold multiple emotions at once. You learn to protect your heart without closing it. And if you're lucky—and supported—you learn that reflection is not a detour from survival. It's part of it.

There's a reason why so many great thinkers, artists, and organizers have come out of places like the Bronx. When you're forced to confront injustice up close, you start to ask deeper questions about power. But when you're also surrounded by humor, culture, and relentless love, you realize that survival isn't just about critique—it's about creation.

I didn't learn how to write in the Bronx. But I learned how to observe. How to notice what people say and what they don't. How to read body language, tone, subtext. That ability—to feel my way through other people's contradictions—is at the heart of everything I write.

And now, years later, I find myself circling back to what the Bronx gave me: the insistence that if you're not asking yourself who you are, you're just borrowing someone else's version. That if you're not interrogating your own story, someone else will write it for you.

This isn't about nostalgia. It's about gratitude. Gratitude for a place that didn't always feel safe, but always felt honest. Gratitude for the people who modeled complexity without even knowing it. Gratitude for a neighborhood that showed me the difference between being seen and being surveilled, between being heard and being helped.

In politics, we often talk about "the people" in abstract terms. But I see their faces. I hear their stories. And I know that behind every headline about crime or poverty or policy failure, there's a kid sitting on a stoop trying to make sense of a world that wasn't designed for his flourishing. A kid like I was, waiting for someone to tell him that his inner life matters.

No one told me that directly. But the Bronx did. Not with words, but with lessons. With wounds. With moments of unexpected beauty. And now, I try to pay that forward. Not by

preaching, but by writing. By reflecting. By leaving space for contradiction, ambiguity, and the kind of questions that don't have easy answers.

That's what the Bronx taught me: that looking inward isn't a retreat. It's a responsibility. Especially when the world would rather you stay distracted.

Especially when power benefits from your silence.

Especially when your story is more complex than the narratives designed to contain you.

To survive the Bronx, I had to harden. But to grow beyond it, I had to soften again. That's the rhythm of real transformation. Not escaping where you came from, but honoring it by becoming more whole.

And that wholeness—that slow, defiant journey toward integration—is the most revolutionary thing I know how to offer.

CHAPTER 3: THE VOICE THAT STAYED WHEN EVERYONE LEFT

I didn't grow up talking to myself, at least not in ways that would have alarmed anyone. I was taught to tough things out, to endure, to keep my head down when shamed, and to look ahead when praised. I didn't recognize, until much later, that there was a narrator inside me all along—one with a memory, a mouth, and a motive. A voice that could protect me or prosecute me depending on the story I told myself about who I was, what I was doing, and what I deserved.

When I reflect on the twists of my life—losing 70 pounds, abandoning a sales career to open a juice bar, coaching baseball, writing op-eds that no one published, running for President as a symbolic gesture—it's not the external outcomes that surprise me most. It's that I learned how to talk to myself differently. That shift didn't happen overnight. It was a slow reckoning that required turning my inner voice from a broadcaster into a companion, from a hype man or heckler into something like a mirror. Not a perfect mirror—more like the kind you find in antique shops, warped and smudged—but honest enough to catch glimpses of truth when I leaned in closely and dared to ask better questions.

That's the paradox of self-talk. We need it to grow, to confront our distortions, to stay anchored in moments of doubt. But left unchecked, it becomes another performance. Another internal PR campaign. It flatters or scolds without offering clarity. We mistake it for conscience when really it's conditioning. Worse, we sometimes use it to rationalize stagnation—to explain away what hurts rather than excavate the truth of it.

I've learned that if my inner dialogue only comforts me or only criticizes me, it's not working. Growth lives in the space between those extremes—in the humility to question even our most noble intentions, and in the grace to not let every misstep collapse into a character indictment.

And still, I'm often not that graceful.

I used to tell myself I was "resilient." It sounded good. It made me feel like I had armor when life threw curveballs. But "resilience" was often code for avoidance. I prided myself on how quickly I could move on. I thought I was adapting. But really, I was skipping the discomfort of processing hard things. I believed if I just did the next right thing, everything would recalibrate. Only later did I realize that my inner voice had learned to frame discomfort as weakness. That made self-reflection dangerous, not because it revealed flaws—but because I had trained myself to equate reflection with regression. I didn't want to be

“one of those people” who spiraled into overthinking. So I’d move forward quickly, confidently—until I burned out or hurt someone or broke something I actually cared about.

Eventually I asked myself: What if resilience without reflection isn’t strength, but denial? What if I’m sprinting through my own life, narrating it like a highlight reel, instead of listening to the voice underneath—the one asking, “Are you sure?”

Constructive self-talk, when it's honest, is a confrontation. Not a punishment. Not a pep rally. A conversation. One that starts with uncomfortable questions: Why did that comment make me so angry? What do I want from this person that I’m not admitting? Why does failure feel like annihilation instead of information?

Some days I resist these questions because they threaten the version of myself I’ve invested in. We all do this. We defend the narratives that give us identity—even if they limit us. It’s easier to say, “That’s just how I am” than to say, “Maybe I’ve misunderstood myself.”

But “how I am” isn’t fixed. It’s a snapshot. A freeze-frame in a longer film. And every time I replay that film—every time I reflect honestly—I have the chance to edit it not for vanity, but for understanding.

Still, most of us don’t reflect like editors. We reflect like jurors. We assign blame, look for guilt, and deliver verdicts: “I’m a screw-up.” “I always do this.” “They’ll never understand me.” That’s not constructive self-talk. That’s a closed loop of self-fulfilling prophecy.

What I’ve had to practice is seeing self-talk as a window, not a wall. It’s not where the story ends. It’s where I look out and ask what’s possible beyond my current vantage point.

I started coaching teenagers in baseball not long after I started coaching myself. That overlap changed me. I realized how rarely we’re taught how to talk to ourselves in a way that encourages effort without pretending that effort guarantees success. I wanted my players to feel what I was trying to teach myself: that progress is not linear, and failure is not disqualifying.

I’d watch a kid strike out, slam his helmet, and mutter “I suck.” Then he’d sulk the whole inning. I knew that voice. I had lived with that voice. But I also knew it was a lie disguised as humility. That voice wasn’t helping him. It was keeping him small, reinforcing a self-image that couldn’t accommodate error without collapse.

So I’d ask questions: “What were you trying to do on that pitch?” “What did you notice about the pitcher?” I wasn’t trying to make him feel better. I was trying to make him

curious. Because curiosity disrupts shame. It invites learning where blame would shut the door.

Eventually I realized: I needed to ask myself those same questions when I failed. In relationships. In writing. In leadership. Instead of defaulting to shame or spin, I had to practice curiosity. Not as a tactic—but as a posture.

But there are blind spots, even here. The biggest one? Assuming that because I talk to myself constructively, I am constructive. That I'm enlightened. That I've arrived. That's the trap. Once your inner voice evolves, it's tempting to worship it—to believe your own commentary instead of returning to observation.

Sometimes, my self-talk becomes so eloquent that I mistake it for truth. I'll rationalize bad choices with great language. I'll frame selfishness as "boundaries." I'll frame detachment as "acceptance." I'll give myself the benefit of the doubt I don't extend to others.

This is why I write. Because writing, at its best, outs my performance. It forces me to put my thoughts on paper and see where they contradict, where they collapse, where they reveal patterns I didn't notice. Writing is where my inner voice meets accountability.

One of the most humbling realizations in my life is that I'm often the last to see my own blind spots. And that no matter how self-aware I think I am, I still rely on others to point out the distortions I've normalized. That's why I've learned to treat feedback not as a threat, but as a mirror with better lighting.

Constructive self-talk can't replace community. It's a crucial ingredient—but it's incomplete. We need each other's questions. Each other's honesty. The friend who gently says, "You've told yourself this story before. What if it's not true?" The stranger who says something we disagree with so intensely that we have to examine why we're reacting so strongly.

When I listen to others—really listen—I learn how limited my inner voice still is. Not because it's bad, but because it's mine. And my experience, no matter how rich, is only one frame in a vast mosaic.

I still talk to myself every day. But now I do it with a posture of inquiry rather than certainty. I ask myself questions I don't always answer. I allow discomfort to linger longer than it used to. I try not to outsource my self-worth to applause or outrage. I remind myself that growth isn't always visible—and that sometimes, the most important work is invisible.

There’s no formula for self-confrontation. There’s only the ongoing courage to admit we might be wrong, and the patience to keep listening to the voice that stays when everyone else leaves.

And sometimes, in the quiet that follows, a better version of ourselves begins to speak.

CHAPTER 4: THINKING FOR YOURSELF IN A WORLD TELLING YOU WHAT TO BELIEVE

There's a strange kind of courage required to think for yourself in America today. Not the kind that makes headlines or wins debates—but the quiet, interior kind. The kind that resists the subtle pressure to perform allegiance, to echo your tribe, to be seen believing the right things in the right way.

Most of us are not taught to think. We're taught to curate. From school to social media, we're rewarded for aligning ourselves with consensus, for knowing the right answers, for expressing the right indignation at the right time. We're trained to absorb, not examine. To conform, not question.

When I began trying to disentangle my own thoughts from the noise of public discourse, I was struck by how many of my beliefs weren't actually mine. They were inherited. Absorbed. Mimicked. They felt real because they came with community. But they hadn't been earned through doubt, discomfort, or honest self-inquiry. And until I could trace them back to those things, I couldn't trust them.

It's easy to mistake agreement for clarity. But there's a difference between internal conviction and external validation. I didn't fully grasp that until I started spending long stretches in silence—reading, writing, listening to the static underneath my certainty. I realized that much of what I believed was shaped by a fear of being misunderstood. I wasn't forming opinions—I was managing impressions.

This is especially true in politics. We're constantly being nudged toward pre-approved narratives. If you care about justice, you must vote this way. If you value tradition, you must oppose that. If you critique the system, you must be an idealist. If you believe in gradual change, you're complicit. The categories tighten. The room to breathe shrinks. And suddenly, thinking for yourself feels like betrayal.

I've felt this pressure most acutely in progressive spaces—where the language of liberation can sometimes become its own kind of orthodoxy. Where doubt is seen as regression and nuance is treated as weakness. It's ironic, really. A movement meant to challenge power can so easily become another performance of it.

But this isn't unique to the left. On the right, conformity comes cloaked in tradition. Deviating from the accepted script is met with suspicion, even hostility. You're either loyal

or you're lost. You're either for us or against us. And in both cases, the result is the same: curiosity dies. The space for contradiction shrinks. And politics becomes a theater of certainty instead of a laboratory of thought.

That's why I've come to see thinking for yourself as a radical act. Not because it guarantees better answers, but because it forces you to sit with discomfort. It forces you to ask: What do I believe, apart from how I want to be perceived? What do I know, not because someone told me, but because I've tested it against my lived experience, my conscience, and my capacity to change?

This isn't a call for centrism or neutrality. Some things deserve moral clarity. But moral clarity shouldn't come at the expense of humility. It should be rooted in a willingness to revise. To listen. To be wrong.

And that's the part we rarely talk about: the cost of thinking for yourself. It's lonely. It's slow. You lose friends. You get misunderstood. People project motives onto you. They think you're hedging when really, you're just not sure. They think you're disloyal when really, you're trying to be honest.

But here's what I've discovered: over time, that kind of thinking builds something sturdier than approval. It builds integrity. And that integrity, while not always visible or celebrated, becomes your compass. It allows you to speak—not to persuade, but to be understood. It allows you to listen—not to respond, but to learn.

I've written things that alienated people I care about. I've said things I later regretted. I've stayed silent when I should have spoken. But through all of it, I've tried to return to one question: What's true for me right now, and what does that truth require of me?

Sometimes the answer is inconvenient. It doesn't fit neatly into a platform. It doesn't satisfy an algorithm. But it's mine. And owning it—even when it costs me—is the only way I know how to stay human in a world that constantly tells you what to think, how to vote, and who to become.

So I write this chapter not as a manifesto, but as a meditation. A reminder that thinking for yourself isn't about pride—it's about practice. It's about building the muscle of discernment in a culture that rewards imitation. It's about resisting the urge to interrupt with your script and instead, attuning to the deeper work of forming your own.

Because in the end, the point isn't to be seen as right. The point is to be free.

CHAPTER 5: THE DANCE BETWEEN BOLD ACTION AND REFLECTIVE GROWTH IN MONEY AND DEMOCRACY

There's a tension I carry with me every day—the one between doing and understanding, between acting decisively and pausing long enough to know why. That tension becomes particularly sharp when it comes to money and democracy, two forces that shape almost every decision we make in this country, yet rarely in ways we fully understand.

For a long time, I thought bold action was the answer to everything. Speak louder. Move faster. Spend when you have it. Protest when you don't. I thought power respected momentum, and that if you paused to reflect too long, you'd miss your chance. That mindset worked—until it didn't.

Running a juice bar in Brooklyn taught me how fickle money really is. You can do everything "right" and still find yourself drowning. You can provide a service that nourishes people's bodies and still get priced out by the same neighborhood that once applauded your presence. And you can work eighteen-hour days and still wonder if the rent will clear.

At first, I blamed the system—capitalism, gentrification, the city's labyrinthine bureaucracy. And yes, those things matter. They shape our realities in profound ways. But what took me longer to see was how deeply I had internalized a narrative of action over reflection. That if I just kept moving, I could outrun my anxiety, outwork my uncertainty, and outmaneuver the quiet voice inside asking if any of this was sustainable.

That's when I began to understand democracy in a different way. Not as something that lives in elections or policy, but as a kind of spiritual architecture—a way of relating to others that starts with how you relate to yourself. And in that frame, the most democratic thing you can do isn't to shout louder or act faster. It's to grow. To reflect. To become the kind of person who can hold competing truths without needing to flatten one into a slogan.

That's hard to do in a society that's constantly asking you to pick a side, perform certainty, and consume more. Capitalism thrives on urgency, and urgency is the enemy of introspection. You're not supposed to pause and ask if the hustle makes sense. You're supposed to keep grinding until you either win or break. And if you break, well, that's a branding opportunity too.

But what if growth doesn't look like winning? What if it looks like asking harder questions, surrendering old ambitions, or admitting that your success might have come at someone else's expense? What if the boldest action isn't domination, but transformation—the kind that doesn't sell, doesn't trend, and doesn't fit into a campaign slogan?

Money complicates all of this. It distorts our values, confuses our goals, and masks our insecurities. I've watched people compromise their integrity for financial security. I've done it myself. Not in big, dramatic ways—but in small, corrosive ones. Saying yes when I meant no. Playing along when I knew better. Smiling when I wanted to scream.

Democracy, if it's to mean anything, must give us a way out of that. Not just a vote, but a vocabulary. Not just a right, but a rhythm—a pace slow enough to hear yourself think, and brave enough to act once you've heard.

There's a reason so many movements lose steam. It's not just burnout. It's the failure to integrate boldness with reflection. We act before we've healed. We speak before we've listened. And then we wonder why the change doesn't last.

I've come to believe that sustainable change requires both: the courage to act and the humility to pause. The public fire and the private reckoning. The protest march and the quiet journal entry the next morning. That's the dance.

And if you watch closely, you'll see that the people who move best within this dance aren't always the loudest. They're the ones who've done the work—the unsexy, invisible, ongoing work of self-inquiry. They've interrogated their motives, questioned their stories, and let go of the fantasy that change will feel good or look clean.

We need more of that. In our politics. In our communities. In ourselves.

Because democracy without self-awareness is just mob rule with better branding. And money without meaning is just noise with higher stakes.

So here's where I've landed, at least for now: I still believe in bold action. But only when it's rooted in reflection. I still value money. But only when it's aligned with integrity. And I still hope for democracy. But only if it begins with the kind of growth that no one else can do for you.

That growth is slow. It's uncomfortable. It doesn't come with applause. But it might just be the most political thing you can do.

In a world addicted to momentum, pausing is an act of resistance. Reflecting is revolutionary. And growing, in public and in private, might be the boldest action of all.

CHAPTER 6: CONTRASTING DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S WRITINGS WITH 'COUNTRY BEFORE PARTY' RHETORIC

There's a phrase that gets tossed around a lot in American politics: "Country before party." It's meant to signal moral clarity—a call to rise above partisan bickering and put national interest first. But every time I hear it, something in me tightens. Not because I disagree with the sentiment, but because I've come to understand how easily noble slogans can become tools of avoidance.

It wasn't until I encountered the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer that I began to see the full weight—and insufficiency—of such rhetoric. Bonhoeffer didn't just call for conscience over ideology; he lived it, even when it cost him his life. He understood that moral courage isn't about saying the right thing when it's convenient. It's about doing the right thing when it's dangerous. And more importantly, it's about acknowledging the complexity of evil—not just in others, but within ourselves.

Bonhoeffer's writings are laced with humility. He didn't see himself as a savior. He saw himself as complicit. And from that posture, he wrote not to claim the moral high ground, but to invite others into the messy, painful, often thankless work of integrity.

Contrast that with the way "country before party" is used today. It's often deployed by politicians who want to appear principled without challenging the very systems they benefit from. It's a way of signaling virtue without risking anything. It's an interruption disguised as attunement.

That's the danger of slogans—they can anesthetize. They can make us feel like we've done something meaningful simply by saying the right words. But Bonhoeffer teaches us that meaning isn't found in what we profess. It's found in what we're willing to relinquish.

In America, we rarely talk about relinquishment. We talk about winning. About persuasion. About staying on message. But integrity requires a different metric. It asks: What are you willing to lose for the sake of truth? Your comfort? Your career? Your narrative?

Bonhoeffer lost everything. And yet, he never stopped writing. Never stopped asking hard questions. Never stopped resisting the urge to reduce complex moral decisions to binary choices. He understood that true fidelity wasn't to a nation or a party, but to conscience.

And that's what's missing from most of our political discourse. Not passion—we have plenty of that. Not intelligence—we have that too. What we lack is the willingness to see ourselves as part of the problem. To admit that the line between good and evil doesn't run between parties, but through every human heart.

I've been guilty of seeking the moral upper hand. Of believing that my insights exempted me from self-examination. But every time I return to Bonhoeffer, I'm reminded that righteousness without humility is just another form of hubris. And in that sense, "country before party" isn't wrong—it's just incomplete.

What if the real challenge isn't choosing country over party, but choosing truth over comfort? What if it's not about signaling that we're above the fray, but about getting honest about how the fray lives in us?

That kind of honesty doesn't trend. It doesn't win elections. But it does something far more important: it clears the fog. It allows us to stop performing and start attending—to the harm we've caused, the narratives we've clung to, and the silence we've maintained.

Bonhoeffer never asked to be admired. He asked to be understood. And in understanding him, we're confronted with a truth we often avoid: that moral clarity requires moral cost. Not in theory, but in practice. Not someday, but now.

"Country before party" is a fine start. But it's only a start. It doesn't tell us what we must do when our country itself is compromised. It doesn't tell us how to act when every institution we once trusted is infected by cynicism. And it doesn't ask us to examine what we're clinging to when we refuse to change.

So I've stopped using the phrase. Not because I reject its intent, but because I want something more demanding. I want a politics that invites us to look inward. That asks not just who we vote for, but what we're willing to sacrifice for the world we say we want.

That's what Bonhoeffer understood. And that's what I hope to carry forward—not as a slogan, but as a standard.

CHAPTER 7: WHY MOST AMERICANS LACK THE INTELLECTUAL BANDWIDTH TO CONCEPTUALIZE CHE'S NUANCES

I've long been fascinated by the way Americans talk about Che Guevara—not because they admire him, but because of how much they don't. Or rather, how much they refuse to try to understand him.

Mention Che's name and the responses are reflexive: dictator, murderer, idealist, terrorist, T-shirt icon. Rarely does someone pause to ask, "What was he actually trying to do? What contradictions lived in him?" Instead, we reduce him to symbols that serve our cultural arguments. He's either the face of rebellion or the poster boy for tyranny, depending on who's doing the talking.

But people aren't symbols. And Che, perhaps more than most, defies the easy binaries that dominate American political discourse. That, I suspect, is why we struggle so much with him. Because to understand Che, you have to be willing to hold multiple, conflicting truths. And we live in a culture that punishes ambiguity.

We want our heroes to be pure and our villains to be irredeemable. We want moral clarity served fast, clean, and preferably wrapped in a meme. But Che doesn't fit. He was a doctor who became a soldier. A Marxist who valued discipline. A revolutionary who wrote poetry. A man of conviction who also participated in executions.

What do we do with that?

Most of the time, we don't. We discard the complexity and argue about the T-shirt.

This isn't really about Che, though. It's about us. About how our intellectual bandwidth—our collective capacity to entertain complexity—has atrophied. Not because we're stupid, but because we've been trained to process ideas the way we process content: quickly, emotionally, and without nuance.

Social media has done a number on our attention spans, but the problem runs deeper. Our political system itself thrives on simplification. Campaigns are built around slogans, not substance. Candidates are marketed, not examined. And voters are encouraged to pick teams, not reflect.

In that environment, someone like Che becomes unintelligible. Because understanding him would require us to slow down. To read. To question our categories. To ask: What does justice require when the system itself is violence? When is resistance moral? When does idealism become authoritarianism? And can a person be both admirable and dangerous at once?

Those are hard questions. They don't resolve neatly. They don't make for good talking points. But they are, I believe, the questions that matter.

I'm not here to defend Che. I'm here to defend our capacity to think.

To hold a figure like Che with any integrity, you must confront your own contradictions. That's what he tried to do, in ways that were both inspiring and terrifying. He believed the world could be remade—but he also believed that violence was sometimes necessary to do it. You don't have to agree with that to wrestle with it. You just have to care enough to try.

But caring is exhausting. Especially when the culture encourages shortcuts. And so we outsource our opinions to algorithms. We pick our outrage based on headlines. We label people before we've listened to them.

I get it. Life is busy. Complexity is inconvenient. But every time we reduce someone like Che to a caricature, we lose a bit of our own depth. We start believing that history is a series of easy choices instead of a web of impossible ones. And we lose the humility required to grow.

What would it look like to teach Che in American schools—not to glorify him, but to grapple with him? What would it mean to read his journals alongside critiques of his methods? To sit in a room and debate not whether he was good or bad, but what his life reveals about the limits of ideology?

I think it would change us.

It would force us to see that change is never clean. That revolution always costs something. And that the people who try to bend history often carry wounds that never heal.

It might also help us reframe our own politics. To see that being "for the people" isn't enough if you've lost touch with your humanity. That fighting injustice doesn't grant you immunity from becoming unjust. And that the real danger isn't in Che's ideas—it's in our refusal to wrestle with them honestly.

There's a scene I often think about: Che in Bolivia, dying alone in a schoolhouse, wounded and hunted, after giving up the privileges of global celebrity to fight for people he barely

knew. That doesn't excuse the violence he inflicted. But it does complicate the story. It reminds me that conviction, even when misguided, can be sincere. And sincerity, while not a defense, is a clue—a clue to the pain, the longing, the desperation that drives people to do unthinkable things.

We don't have to excuse Che to learn from him. We don't have to agree with his politics to honor the questions he raises. But we do have to try. Because when we stop trying, we stop growing. And when we stop growing, we lose the very thing Che was willing to die for: the belief that human beings, in all their messiness, can be more than what the system tells them they are.

So no, most Americans can't conceptualize Che's nuances. But it's not too late to try. And maybe, in the trying, we'll recover something we didn't know we lost: our capacity to think, to feel, and to evolve—not as partisans, but as people.

CHAPTER 8: THE FAIRNESS MYTH AT THE COST OF COMFORT

For most of my life, I clung to the idea that the world should be fair. That if you did the right thing—worked hard, told the truth, treated people well—things would work out. Not perfectly, but justly. That life would somehow reward decency. That the universe kept a scorecard.

It's a beautiful idea. And a dangerous one.

Because the longer I lived with that belief, the more I began to notice a quiet bitterness forming beneath it. Every time something unfair happened—every time someone else got ahead by cutting corners, or every time integrity came with a cost—I felt personally betrayed. Not just disappointed, but offended. As if the world had broken a contract I never realized I was trying to enforce.

That's when I began to see it: my belief in fairness wasn't just a hope. It was a form of comfort. A psychological cushion that made the chaos of life feel tolerable. If I could just believe that fairness was real, then suffering had meaning. Then setbacks were temporary. Then everything was still under control.

But the world is not fair. It's not built to be. And the more I tried to force it to be, the more I suffered.

Letting go of the fairness myth didn't happen all at once. It came in waves—small losses, betrayals, unspoken hypocrisies. It came through watching people I loved struggle while others thrived on manipulation. It came through reading history, where injustice wasn't the exception but the pattern.

At first, that realization made me cynical. I pulled back. I stopped trusting people. I stopped engaging. I confused detachment for wisdom. But eventually, something shifted. I began to understand that abandoning the myth of fairness didn't mean abandoning ethics. It meant grounding my ethics in something sturdier than outcome.

It meant doing the right thing not because it would work, but because it aligned with who I wanted to be.

That shift changed everything.

It made me less angry when life didn't reward me. It made me more compassionate toward people whose actions I once judged. It made me more curious about how systems are designed—not just who's winning within them.

And it made me start asking a deeper question: Who benefits from the fairness myth?

Because make no mistake, it is a myth. And like most myths, it serves someone. In this case, it often serves the people already at the top. If you believe the system is fair, you're less likely to question its outcomes. You're more likely to blame yourself for your suffering. And you're less likely to challenge the structures that create inequality in the first place.

Fairness, in this sense, becomes a pacifier. It soothes you into silence. It keeps you striving within a game whose rules are invisible and constantly shifting.

But once you stop needing life to be fair, you start to see it more clearly.

You see how policies that sound neutral often have wildly unequal impacts. You see how morality is often weaponized to maintain control. You see how power doesn't reward virtue—it rewards loyalty, spectacle, and the ability to obscure harm.

And then you're faced with a choice: Do you try to make the world fair? Or do you try to make it honest?

I've chosen the latter. Because honesty, unlike fairness, doesn't depend on how things turn out. It's not about justice delivered. It's about truth revealed. It's about building a relationship with reality that isn't mediated by hope or fear.

That doesn't mean giving up on justice. It means redefining it. Not as a prize to be won, but as a practice to be lived. Not as something guaranteed, but as something worth pursuing—even in the absence of reward.

That kind of justice requires a different kind of strength. A strength rooted not in certainty, but in clarity. In the ability to act without needing applause. In the willingness to tell the truth when it would be easier to stay comfortable.

Comfort, after all, is what most of us are trained to protect. It's what we've been sold as the reward for playing by the rules. But comfort is a poor substitute for meaning. And the people I admire most are the ones who've risked their comfort to tell the truth—to themselves, to their communities, to the world.

I want to be one of those people. I want to live in a way that doesn't require the world to be fair, only that I remain faithful—to my values, to my conscience, to the quiet voice that keeps asking harder questions.

So I've let go of the fairness myth. And in its place, I've built something better: a life grounded in intention, not expectation. A politics rooted in integrity, not outcomes. And a kind of peace that doesn't come from getting what I want, but from knowing why I want it.

That's the cost of comfort. But it's also the beginning of freedom. But as I let go of fairness as a promise life ever made to us, I started to wonder what else I might be clinging to that's just as illusory — not in society, but in myself. If I'm honest, my search for clarity, my insistence on philosophical framing, and my reverence for nuance may have protected me more than they've revealed anything to others. Perhaps my discomfort with slogans and soundbites isn't just a moral stance — maybe it's a barrier I've built, one that keeps me insulated from urgency and misunderstanding. What if the very language I use to confront illusion is, itself, an illusion? The next essay explores that possibility — not to correct it, but to finally look it in the eye.

CHAPTER 9: THE DISTANCE I DIDN'T SEE: WRITING FOR AN AUDIENCE THAT ISN'T LISTENING

I'm aware that the people who most need convincing probably won't finish reading this.

I'm also aware that I write in a way that tends to alienate the very audiences who view politics through urgency rather than introspection, who experience injustice not as theory but as routine, and who, understandably, find little patience for philosophical detours or self-inquiry from a man writing essays from a juice bar in Brooklyn that may seem like a pompous juice man doling out unsolicited advice from an ivory tower.

That's not an insult. It's a recognition of mismatch — between how I write and what many people feel they need.

This pamphlet is a collection of essays stitched together during my social media fast (January to June 2025) of unpublished op-eds. They're mostly about discomfort — mine, and America's — and the uneasy relationship between conscience and performance. I reflect on my symbolic presidential run, on self-talk, on civic detachment, and on philosophical figures like Bonhoeffer and Che. But what these essays don't always do — and this is my blindspot — is meet people where they are.

I don't mean demographically. I'm Puerto Rican, from the Bronx. I've failed more than I've succeeded. I've run a small business for over a decade. I've never been backed by a think tank, publication, or donor base. If you look at my résumé, there's nothing in it that screams detachment. But detachment isn't always about background. It's often about tone. And mine has its limits.

I write to think, not to rally. I tend to choose curiosity over clarity, doubt over certainty, nuance over narrative. And while I believe that posture helps keep me honest, it can come off — to readers outside my ideological rhythm — as vague, indulgent, or worse, indifferent. I've spent years reflecting publicly, but not always accessibly. I've asked readers to sit with contradiction, but haven't always considered how little time many have for that kind of sitting.

Here's where objectivity matters: There are entire groups of people whose engagement with politics isn't theoretical. For them, the question isn't, "How should we conceptualize fairness?" It's, "Why hasn't my landlord fixed the heat?" "Why is my kid's school underfunded?" "Why does my job still not offer health insurance?" In that reality, my

meditations on conscience or the limits of moral clarity may feel like distractions — or worse, evasions. The page I see as ethical excavation may register as me circling the same privileged question for the hundredth time.

And that's fair.

Because while I think of my work as an effort to disrupt ego, it may just read to others as ego with better lighting. I use language as a tool for investigation — but I also use it, if I'm honest, as a way to shield myself from emotional exposure. I talk about truth, but I do so on my terms. I insist on complexity, but rarely interrogate whether that insistence is itself a kind of comfort.

This isn't a moral failure. But it is a limitation. And limitations matter if you care about being understood.

I write for readers who still believe doubt is a form of engagement. But those readers tend to skew toward people who already have some level of control over their lives — time to reflect, distance from emergency, emotional bandwidth to tolerate ambiguity. For others, my work may not only miss the mark; it may affirm their suspicion that some writers treat suffering like a philosophical prompt.

Again, that's not an accusation. It's a pattern worth acknowledging.

So why keep writing this way?

Because I believe the interior shapes the exterior. That the way we speak to ourselves influences how we build institutions. That civic renewal isn't just about policies — it's about the psychological habits we reward or ignore. But belief isn't enough. Context matters too. And if my writing doesn't account for how that context lands with people who don't share my rhythm, then I'm not writing for an audience — I'm writing in a vacuum.

Some of my most frequent critics — the ones I don't hear from directly, but who show up in the silences, the shrugs, the non-responses — aren't wrong to tune out. They're operating on a different register. They don't want meditations; they want mechanisms. They want systems, policies, demands. And if they can't find those things in my work, it's not because they're shallow — it's because I didn't provide them.

There's no shame in this. Not every voice speaks to every moment. But there is risk in mistaking internal insight for public relevance. Writing about self-awareness doesn't make

you socially useful — especially if your writing style filters out the very people whose lives most embody the contradictions you claim to explore.

I'm not immune to that contradiction. I write often about the "discipline of insignificance," about letting go of influence as a goal. And yet, I still submit essays. I still want to be read. I still believe that if people really sat with the discomfort of their own contradictions, something better might emerge. But that belief doesn't entitle me to anyone's attention. It doesn't mean my writing matters where it hasn't proven itself useful.

That's why this chapter isn't an argument for why I should be heard. It's a reflection on why I haven't been. Not because the work lacks substance, but because I haven't always been clear about who it's for — and who it leaves out.

So if you've come across my work and found it too slow, too vague, too wrapped in its own language — you're probably right. If you've felt that I'm diagnosing problems from the safety of introspection, instead of from within the urgency of lived injustice — you're not imagining that. And if you've thought, "This guy writes like he's talking to people who already agree with him," then maybe I've been doing just that.

I can't rewrite all of it. But I can name it.

And sometimes, naming a distance is the first step toward bridging it — not with performative accessibility, but with clearer intention.

So if you don't read me, this one's for you. Not as a pitch, but as a pause. Not as outreach, but as inventory. I'll keep writing. You'll keep deciding whether it's worth your time.

And maybe that's the most honest transaction we have left.

CHAPTER 10: NOTES FROM A MAN WHO MIGHT'VE JUST NEEDED THERAPY

I used to think I needed to save the world. Not in the cape-and-mask sense, but in the way people sometimes quietly carry the burden of making sense of everything around them. I thought it was my job to diagnose what was broken—in politics, in culture, in people—and offer some kind of blueprint for healing. But as time passed, the more I realized: maybe I wasn't trying to fix the world. Maybe I was just trying to fix myself.

Looking back, it's almost funny how long it took me to ask the obvious question: What if I just needed therapy?

Not the kind where someone tells you to meditate more and journal your gratitude—though I've done both. I mean the kind of deep, slow work that forces you to stop performing and start noticing. The kind that peels back the layers you've spent a lifetime constructing, not to expose some pristine core, but to show you how fragile and scared and full of contradiction you really are.

I've always been good at writing. At analyzing. At noticing patterns. But therapy showed me something writing never could: how often my insights were just defenses in disguise. How often I used intellect as armor, compassion as currency, wisdom as a way to avoid being seen.

Because being seen means being vulnerable. It means admitting you're not okay. That your ideas, no matter how noble, may have grown from pain rather than purpose.

Therapy didn't make me less political. It made me more honest. About my motives. About the gap between who I said I wanted to be and who I actually was. About how much of my identity was wrapped up in appearing wise, composed, unshakeable.

I thought I was a seeker of truth. Turns out, I was also avoiding a more personal one: I didn't trust people to hold my softness.

So I built a worldview around control. Around clarity. Around explaining things before I had to feel them. And people loved it. They called me insightful. Thoughtful. Grounded. But deep down, I knew I was hiding.

Because the work of healing isn't public. It's private, messy, and humiliating. It doesn't come with applause. It comes with nights when you're curled up in bed, wondering if any of this—your thoughts, your words, your politics—actually matter, or if you've just found a clever way to avoid the real grief.

And there is grief. So much of it. Grief for the child who had to grow up too fast. Grief for the stories we told ourselves to survive. Grief for the people we hurt while trying to help. Grief for the moments we missed because we were too busy trying to be impressive.

I used to believe that the pain made me strong. Now I see that it made me guarded. And that strength, real strength, has less to do with how much you can carry and more to do with how willing you are to set it down.

I'm still learning how to set it down.

Therapy taught me that some questions aren't meant to be answered—only lived. That silence isn't always emptiness. That presence doesn't require performance. And that sometimes, the most radical thing you can do is admit that you're not sure anymore.

I still care about justice. Still rage at inequality. Still write about the contradictions in our politics. But I do it now from a different place. A quieter one. Not because I've figured it all out, but because I'm finally okay with not knowing.

That's the paradox: the more I let go of needing to be right, the more clearly I see. Not because my mind is sharper, but because my heart is softer. Because I'm no longer trying to prove anything. I'm just trying to be—with all my mess, my wounds, my hopes.

People sometimes ask me where my political clarity comes from. I tell them it started with confusion. With therapy. With sitting across from someone who wasn't impressed by my analysis, who kept asking, "But how did that feel?" And who didn't flinch when I couldn't answer.

If I've learned anything, it's that politics without inner work is performance. That activism without reflection becomes projection. And that the loudest voices in the room are often the ones most afraid to be quiet.

I used to be one of those voices. Now, I'm learning to listen. To myself. To the spaces in between thoughts. To the parts of me I once dismissed as irrelevant to the cause.

And you know what I've found? That the revolution I was waiting for out there had to begin in here. In the gut. In the breath. In the small, unremarkable decision to be present with my own pain.

I still believe in change. But I no longer think it starts with policy. It starts with presence. With people learning to sit with themselves long enough to hear the quiet truth underneath the noise.

Maybe I didn't need a movement. Maybe I just needed therapy.

And maybe, just maybe, that's where the real movement begins.

CHAPTER 11: THE DISCIPLINE OF INSIGNIFICANCE

Back in 2019, fueled by a restless sense of duty and the quiet hope that clarity could still cut through noise, I stood outside my Brooklyn juice bar with a clipboard in hand, accompanied by a John McCain impersonator, asking strangers for signatures. It wasn't a petition or a protest. I was gathering the necessary paperwork to launch an independent run for President of the United States.

It sounds absurd now—maybe even then—but I wasn't chasing power. I had just finished reading Confessions of a Media Manipulator by Ryan Holiday and had worked my way through everything Barack Obama had written. I wasn't enamored with politics; I was obsessed with the machinery behind influence—how narratives are built, sold, and consumed in a society that rewards spectacle more than substance.

I didn't want to win. I wanted to understand. I wanted to see if a person could walk into the arena without losing themselves to it. My campaign never made it past the clipboard, but it gave me a front-row seat to something that's haunted me ever since: the way our hunger for heroes distorts our sense of what actually heals a country. That experience—odd, humbling, and untelevised—was the beginning of the end of my illusions about change. It set me on a quieter path, away from power, and toward something far more elusive: the discipline of insignificance.

Outside of collecting signatures, I've never had a campaign slogan. No buttons, no social media blitzes, no door-knocking rallies. And yet, for as long as I can remember, I've been engaged in something far more demanding than politics—a lifelong, mostly invisible campaign to accept the limits of my own significance. In a country where attention equals value and influence is mistaken for understanding, that kind of quiet work doesn't win elections or generate viral moments. But it's the only way I've found to stay honest.

It's hard not to notice someone like Zohran Kwame Mamdani. He's articulate, charismatic, and speaks with the confident urgency of someone who believes politics can be reshaped from the inside out. In just a few short years, he's become a rising star in New York progressive politics, often framed as a standard-bearer of the Democratic Socialists of America—a movement that energizes a base disillusioned with corporate power and entrenched inequality. His rise is both impressive and, in a way, predictable. In this moment, where visibility is often equated with virtue, the right blend of idealism and identity can carry you far.

I don't write this to diminish Zohran. In many ways, his commitment to justice is sincere, and I see in him the same fire I carried in my twenties—the belief that if you just told people the truth in a compelling enough way, the world would change. That if you aligned yourself with the oppressed, the corrupt would tremble. That all systems were waiting to be undone by someone brave enough to name their contradictions.

But life, if you let it, will sand down your delusions.

My education wasn't forged in academia or political organizations. It came through years of working in Brooklyn, listening more than I spoke, journaling in laundromats, selling smoothies, and watching people—people who didn't have the luxury of defining their lives by political ideals because their lives were already defined by necessity. Over time, I came to understand that no matter how noble your intent, the architecture of power doesn't tremble for idealism.

What makes Zohran popular is also what makes him fragile. He represents hope—not the hard-won, private kind, but the public, performative version we so often outsource to politicians. We want someone to carry our disappointments for us, to express our moral disgust with the system while we maintain our own place within it. We want to feel radical without being uncomfortable. And for that, someone like Zohran fits the bill: young, articulate, idealistic—but still palatable to the media ecosystem that thrives on characters, not contradictions.

I used to think my problem was that I lacked ambition. But I've come to realize I just have a different definition of victory.

Victory, to me, is being able to look in the mirror and know I didn't manipulate someone into liking me. It's walking away from arguments where I could have "won," because the need to win comes from fear, not conviction. It's telling the truth, even when that truth is that I don't have the answers—or worse, that no one does.

What Zohran's brand of politics requires is confidence in the justness of the world, or at least the belief that it can be made just through effort and intention. My experience has taught me the opposite: the world is not just, and the minute you demand fairness from it, you begin the slow process of becoming bitter or manipulative. The way through isn't to demand justice from the world. It's to seek clarity within yourself about what you're willing to do, and what you're not, regardless of the outcome.

There's no revolution coming. Not because one isn't needed, but because our culture has perfected the art of appearing to change while staying exactly the same. Every few years, we

give power a new face, a new vocabulary, a new generation of leaders who seem different but are just as bound by the incentives that govern all systems: keep your audience, avoid offense, win the next round. And maybe that's necessary. Maybe a system this large can't be toppled—only gently redirected. But if that's the case, then we must be honest about what we're doing. This isn't liberation. It's maintenance.

Sometimes, I wonder what it would take for us to admit that this longing for change through politics often conceals a deeper fear—that without the idea of a better future, many of us wouldn't know who we are. That's a heavy truth. But I've chosen not to run from it. I no longer dream of being a leader. I dream of being at peace. That doesn't mean disengagement—it means my engagement is no longer rooted in projection. I don't write to change the world anymore. I write to change myself, and to leave behind a breadcrumb trail for anyone else trying to do the same. That's all I can offer. Not a vision. Not a plan. Just an honest inventory of one person's attempt to see clearly.

The tools I use are simple: honesty, humility, silence. The kind of silence most people avoid because it doesn't perform well on Instagram. But it's within that silence that the real political work happens. Because it's there, stripped of audience and applause, that you discover whether your values are conveniences or commitments.

There was a time I thought silence was surrender. Now, I see it as a moral stance. When people ask me what side I'm on, I think of my neighbors who vote Republican because they're afraid, and those who vote Democrat because they're angry. I think about how both groups are often caricatured by politicians who never step foot in their neighborhoods, and pundits who benefit from their division. Bridging that divide requires more than being right. It requires being quiet long enough to hear the pain under the slogans.

Zohran's appeal lies in his ability to say what many people feel but don't know how to articulate: that something is deeply broken, and that we deserve better. But I've learned that before we deserve better from the world, we have to ask more from ourselves. Not in the form of hustle or ambition—but in courage. The courage to sit with our contradictions. To acknowledge our complicity. To do the dull, interior work of becoming the kind of person who doesn't need to be seen in order to feel real.

In the Bronx, I learned early that most people's suffering isn't romantic. It doesn't inspire poetry or policies. It just is. It lingers in silence, gets passed from generation to generation, and most of it will never be captured in a slogan. That kind of suffering doesn't need representation. It needs someone who isn't afraid of insignificance.

So I've made peace with mine. My insignificance. Not as a flaw, but as a refuge. When you stop needing to be important, you can finally stop lying. And from there, something extraordinary becomes possible: you begin to act not from hope, but from clarity. Not because it will work, but because it aligns with your conscience.

That's the thing no one tells you about growing up politically aware—you start to see how hope can be a form of denial. And how most change doesn't begin with public declarations, but private reckonings. In a society that trains us to respond before we reflect, insignificance becomes a spiritual act of rebellion.

Zohran's rise may be short-lived or enduring—I'm not here to speculate. What I do know is that real change is almost always invisible. It's someone sitting in their apartment, choosing not to lie today. Choosing not to pass on their pain. Choosing to break the cycle, not because they believe it will be noticed, but because they've tasted the bitterness of doing otherwise.

This isn't about choosing between hope and cynicism. It's about walking into the fog and staying there until your eyes adjust. Until you stop demanding clarity from others and begin finding it within. That's the kind of revolution I believe in. And no one needs to get elected for it to begin.